

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Role of African Women in the Political Development of Pre-colonial Africa: A Historical Analysis

*Adjei Adjepong  
Department of History  
University of Cape Coast  
Cape Coast, Ghana*

### ABSTRACT

*'Women in Development' has considerable implications for historical research, since it provides a focus for the attention of historians. Historiography is largely a matter of focus, and the issue of women's contribution to the development of the various facets of the life of society has drawn attention to a class of society whose conditions of life have been infrequently and incompletely explored. In contemporary times, several useful works have appeared in the general area of the study of women in the past. These studies have had serious implications for the way society perceives and treats women as they have contributed towards liberating women from the shackles of male dominance and 'intimidation'. The present study seeks to contribute in this direction by examining the role of African women in the development of the African continent. To this end, the contributions of women are analysed from the perspective of the political life of Africa. Thus, using the multi-disciplinary approach, the study does a critical examination of the contributions African women made to the political development of their respective societies in pre-colonial Africa. It first makes a survey of the pre-colonial African political terrain and reappraises the 'political image' of women in society. It then makes a selection from the historical record and evaluates the circumstances out of which some African women rose to become political leaders in their societies and the contributions they made to ensure the smooth administration and survival of those polities. Per the findings of the study, the paper concludes that the contemporary political stage of Africa owes much of its success to the contributions of some African women in the past. Finally, it maintains that there is the need for the contemporary generation to appreciate the political capabilities of women and place them in key political positions.*

## INTRODUCTION

For a man without woman there is no heaven in the sky or on earth. Without woman there would be no sun, no moon, no agriculture, and no fire (an Arab Proverb, cited in Miles, 1989: 19).

For generations of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and biologists, man has been the sole star of the dawn of human history. The story of the origins of the human race is replete with ‘male-praising’ remarks or appellations such as ‘man the hunter’, ‘man the tool-maker’, ‘man the lord of creation’, etc. As Dora Russell (cited in Miles, 1989: 14) has observed, “the astonishing fact of human history is that religion, philosophy, political, social and economic thought have been reserved as the prerogative of men. Our world is the product of male consciousness”. This trend has tended to exclude from the annals of history any image and contributions of women. Yet evidence from different sites throughout all the ages of human history indicates women’s critical involvement in all aspects of society. Studies on women by different scholars at different times and places have shown the considerable contributions women have made towards the survival and development of society from one era to another. Based on archaeological evidence, as well as existing Stone Age cultures, most of these works emphasise that women were often busy with and essentially expert in food gathering; cooking; child care; pottery; leatherwork; making garments, slings and containers from animal skins; weaving grasses, reeds and bark strips for baskets; fashioning beads and ornaments from teeth or bone; tool-making for a variety of uses; and medicinal application of plants and herbs for everything from healing to abortion (Miles, 1989: 21). In other words, the available evidence points to the fact that women have been very active, competent and, of course, considerably important in the life and development of every society. As the saying goes, “Behind every successful man, there is a woman.” A Zimbabwean proverb also highlights the same view: *Musha Mukadzi*, meaning “behind the successful family, there is a woman” (cited in Akintunde, 2005: 350–351). Both views highlight the centrality of women in all ventures undertaken by men in all societies around the world, particularly in African societies.

What is often not well-known and appreciated, however, is the issue of women’s contribution to the political dimension of society. Interestingly, in this field, too, women’s contributions could not be doubted. In fact, our world past is packed with countless stories of Amazons<sup>1</sup> and Assyrian war queens, female government advisors, queen mothers and imperial concubines who rose to rule many parts of the world (Miles, 1989: 11). Herodotus (cited in Miles, 1989: 46–47) has indicated that Queen Sammuamat (Semiramis) ruled Assyria for forty-two years during which she irrigated the whole of Babylon and led military campaigns as far as India. Tamyris, the Scythian warrior queen and ruler of the Massagetae tribe of what is now Iran, also led her army to victory over the invading hordes of Cyrus the Great, and had the king put to death for the death of her son (Miles, 1989: 50). Again, there are numerous historical accounts about fighting women of the Celts and of women fighters around the Mediterranean and the Near East. Eric Sakyi Nketiah (2005: 1; 2009: 86; and 2011: 82), who has conducted detailed research

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<sup>1</sup> People of ancient Greece thought Africa was populated with monstrous people, and one such group which they believed lived in Africa were the Amazons, fierce women warriors who allowed no men in their tribe and who killed all their male children. See page 14 of Elizabeth Bartlett Thompson’s *Africa: Past and Present*, and page 51 of Rosalind Miles’s *The Women’s History of the World* for more details.

into women in politics in Ghana, has asserted that the post-colonial history of many African countries provides ample evidence of women who surmounted difficult barriers in their societies and influenced the political life of those societies. It is important to note that it is not only post-colonial African history that can boast of numerous women in politics. In pre-colonial Africa, also, there were queen mothers,<sup>2</sup> female chiefs and regents, and individual women whose historical positions and political contributions equalled those of the most prominent males (Ogbomo, 2005: 355–356). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the role African women played in the political development of pre-colonial Africa by looking at the political exploits of some women in their respective societies.<sup>3</sup>

### **Methodology and Data Sources**

It must be stated first that the nature of a study determines the research design to be used and the documents to be consulted. The period chosen for the study dictated the documents to be used. Hence, since no living being was a witness to any event in the pre-colonial days, interviews with eyewitnesses could not form part of the research design. Moreover, it was very difficult identifying and consulting archival material on the topic for examination and use. In effect, the study was largely library-based and depended exclusively on secondary documents. The major works consulted for data included Eric Sakyi Nketiah's "A History of Women in Politics in Ghana (1957–1992)", "The Women's Mass Movement: A Historical Perspective", and "Half a Century of Women in Politics in Ghana (1957–2007): A Historical Synopsis"; Onaiwu W. Ogbomo's "Women, Power and Society in Pre-colonial Africa"; Rosalind Miles' *The Women's History of the World*; Susan Ackerman's "Queen and Queen Mother"; Dorcas O. Akintunde's "The Question of Gender in African Culture"; Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch's "African Women"; Holly Hanson's "Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women's Political Power in the Nineteenth Century East Africa"; Carol P. Hoffer's "Madam Yoko: Ruler of the Kpa Mende Confederacy"; and Carol L. Meyers' "Sheba, Queen of". These works were used because of their relevance to the topic. They provided evidence on the contributions of African women to the political development of the continent in the pre-colonial era. The views and conclusions of these studies helped put the paper in its proper perspective. The information gathered from these major studies was supplemented with evidence collected from other works.<sup>4</sup>

The researcher was aware of the limitations of historical documents, as it is with all documents in all fields of study. He envisaged the likelihood of distortion of facts, exaggeration, understatement and other limitations normally associated with historical documents. The researcher, thus, deemed it necessary to carefully scrutinise and internally and externally critique all the data collected from the available documents in order to present only the accurate and reliable facts. In relating the story, the researcher adopted the narrative, argumentative,

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<sup>2</sup> In this study, the terms *queen* and *queen mother* are used interchangeably. See note 9 for explanation of the differences and similarities.

<sup>3</sup> This paper does not claim to be comprehensive, nor does it purport to have examined the political activities of all African women in the past. Genuinely, it is only a survey, taking into consideration only the activities of some African women who played political roles in their respective societies.

<sup>4</sup> The author appreciates the fact that he might have missed some important works which could have provided useful information to beef up the literature and whose inclusion could have provided a better guide to the study, and duly apologises for any such oversights.

descriptive and explanatory or interpretative approaches. With the narrative, the study gives an accurate account of events by showing change through time and also in a thematic fashion. The study also describes the set of events within 'the event' itself by establishing relationships between them in both vertical and sequential patterns to enable readers get a fairly good picture of these events. The explanatory approach explains the identified relationships between the events and interprets the facts to make the work more intelligible. The argumentative approach provided a basis for analysis of the facts. In sum, the study incorporated the hallowed traditions of historical scholarship: rigorous empirical research, systematic analysis of data, and objectivity.

#### A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF THE CONCEPT OF 'POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT'

For readers to understand the substance of the paper and its arguments, it is essential to clarify what we mean by *political development*. To be able to do this, however, it is imperative for us to explain first what we mean by the terms *politics* and *development*. The term *politics*, like many other concepts, does not yield itself to easy and simple definition. This has made it possible for us to have as many definitions as there are political scientists. Edwin M. Coulter (1994: 10) defines politics simply as the peaceful resolution of human disputes through compromise. Coulter explains politics in another sense as the public actions of free people who desire to be heard and be involved in public questions (p. 17). According to Thomas Magstadt and Peter M. Schotten (1984: 5), politics refers to the way a group of people govern themselves. To James A. Riedel (1971: 5), "politics is that activity, usually a struggle, in which individuals or groups strive for favorable "authoritative" allocation of values." They stress that politics involves interaction between individuals or groups seeking to secure or alter the system of relationships which describe what people may or may not do in their society (p. 5). Claude S. Phillips (1984: 81) is also of the view that politics refers to the process by which authoritative decisions are made for society. He adds that politics in any society is the process by which individuals, to the extent permitted by tradition, law, or force, defend their public interests against others (p. 81). The use of the term *authoritative* in the above definitions suggests that some forms of sanctions are attached to the decisions made, hopefully to assure adherence or punish deviations (Riedel, 1971: 5). Thus, whether a decision is rendered by an elder, a priest or a warrior in an acephalous society or by an executive, legislative or judiciary body in a state society, it is binding on all members of the society to obey. On the other hand, the references to *process* also emphasise that politics is a system for dealing with change and exists even in societies without formal political structures (Phillips, 1984: 81). From the diverse definitions, it is clear that politics is, essentially, an activity, a means to an end, which can take place in simple or complex structures.

The term *development*, like politics, also defies simple explanation or definition. The reason is that there are so many parameters and indices one would have to consider before being able to define *development*. Irving Louis Horowitz (cited in Lindsay, 1985: 8) states that development involves a transformation of human relations within the economic and political spheres regardless of industrialisation and urbanisation. In a similar, yet more comprehensive perspective, Dr. Diene, the former Director of UNESCO in New York, posits that national development is a total or macro process wherein economic, social, or political factors are interacting simultaneously so that indigenous development occurs within each country (Lindsay, 1985: 8). Walter Rodney (2009: 2) maintains that development is an overall social process which

depends on the outcome of peoples' efforts to deal with their environments. In Rodney's opinion, the political structures of a society are very important when considering development because development implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships. Moreover, much of human history has been a struggle for survival against natural disasters and against real and imagined human enemies. This is the more reason why, Rodney observes, in the past, development always meant the increase in the ability to guard the independence of society (p. 2). In the general sense, however, development denotes both the qualitative and quantitative increase in the well-being of people in a country or area. Thus, development implies improvement in all the various facets of a people's culture, particularly in the areas of quality education, health, nutrition, portable water, good roads, good governance and democracy, among others.

It is now time to weave an appropriate explanation for 'political development' from the various definitions assigned politics and development. It is now certain that *development*, whether in economics, social thought, or politics, simply implies a goal-directed behaviour, whereas politics basically refers to the coming together of individuals to govern themselves as a group (Phillips, 1984: 103). Therefore, *political development* implies a goal-directed behaviour that is designed to bring about a stable process in government that can provide effective leadership and legitimacy (Phillips, 1984: 111). Some political scientists stress that political development is not dependent on economics, but on the ability of society to create the necessary governmental institutions that can perform the required political tasks. Their conclusion, therefore, is that political development implies progress towards resolving the problems related to governmental centralisation, peaceful selection of leaders, efficient bureaucracy, and legitimacy (Phillips, 1984: 112).

The plurality of definitions of the concept of political development, within the frame of politics and development, makes it more important to operationalise the concept as it relates to this study. As far as this study is concerned, attention is focused on women's contribution to political development in three perspectives: women in military services, women as political government counsellors or advisors or decision-makers, and women in power as queen mothers and as substantive heads of state and government, that is, as chiefs and regents of their societies.

## WOMEN'S ACCESS TO POWER IN PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

Before one could examine the contributions of African women to the political development of pre-colonial Africa, it would be essential to first analyse the circumstances by which women accessed political power. Of course, much of the available literature on African women's history shows that before the establishment of European colonial rule in Africa, women in many African societies enjoyed considerable freedom of action and were less dependent on their male counterparts. These studies establish that African women participated in mainstream political activities with relatively few restrictions. In most of the pre-colonial West African states, kingdoms and empires, for example, women formed an important component of the host of officials in whose hands the administration of these polities rested. Indeed, in some cases, women were described as the most important officials of the state (Fields, Barber and Riggs, 1988: 377). According to Fields, Barber and Riggs, these women usually were the Queen Mother, the Queen Sister, two or three Great Wives, and some female advisors. The Queen

Mother, of course, was an office filled by being the mother of the king; there usually was room for the choice of the Queen Sister, because any king might have several sisters; the Great Wives and Advisors were selected primarily for their wisdom and judgement. This system was distinctive in that it reserved many important advisory positions for women, something rare in state-level governments (Fields, Barber and Riggs, 1988: 377–378).

It should be noted that in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies,<sup>5</sup> women adopted various strategies by which they were able to attain high office or acquire wealth and influence. Bolanle Awe (cited in Ogbomo, 2005: 356) maintains that a most probable reason for the recognition given to women within their political systems was the widespread principle in most African societies which ensured that every major interest in the society was given some representation in the conduct of government. While accepting this view, Onaiwu W. Ogbomo insists that the mere recognition of women by men was not enough to secure women the numerous positions they held in politics (p. 356). Certainly, pre-colonial African women accessed power and exercised authority through various media. Some acquired power through their husbands or by right of heredity, while others acquired power and position through hard work, diplomacy and strength of character and personalities. Other channels were the political system, class, economic structure and economic opportunities for women, women's ritual powers, and the capacity and effectiveness of women's organisations (Ogbomo, 2005: 356). Among the ancient Egyptians,<sup>6</sup> the Asante of modern Ghana, and other centralised societies, kinship or heredity and marriage were key factors.

## WOMEN UNDER ARMS FOR TERRITORIAL DEFENCE AND EXPANSION

There is scattered but abundant evidence that in the past, there were women under arms, who fought as soldiers in the front-line engagements which conventional wisdom decrees have always been reserved for men. In some cases, ruling queens led their troops to the field, not only as ceremonial figureheads but also as acknowledged and effective war-leaders. In their *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*, Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler (2003: 507) indicate that although men in pre-colonial Africa largely monopolised public authority, women in sub-Saharan Africa generally had more opportunities open to them than did their counterparts in other lands. One of such opportunities was that women could engage in combat and even organise all-female military units. A woman whose name can never be erased from the history of Zambia in this respect is Mamochisane, who was a daughter of Sebitwane, King and founder of the Kolola Kingdom. Mamochisane commanded one of her father's regiments in their armed encounter with the Lozi people, also of Zambia. She was captured during the war but was later released to the father after the Lozi had been defeated (Coquery-

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<sup>5</sup> African societies are either matrilineal or patrilineal in inheritance. In the former, inheritance is through the female lineage whilst in the latter, it is through the male line. Within matrilineal societies, women could rise to prominent political positions as queen mothers and, in some cases, as chiefs. In patrilineal societies, however, such political opportunities were uncommon or non-existent at all. See Eric Sakyi Nketiah's "A History of Women in Politics in Ghana (1957–1992)" for more explanation on this issue.

<sup>6</sup> In her *The Women's History of the World*, Rosalind Miles emphasises heredity as an important means for women to access power in ancient Egypt. She stresses, for example, that in the eighteenth dynasty of the Egyptian monarchy, Pharaoh Thutmose I had to yield the throne on the death of her wife to his teenage daughter Hatshepsut, even though Thutmose had two sons. See page 47 of her work for the details.

Vidrovitch, 1994: 37). Though Mamochisane was captured in the course of the war, we can conveniently say that her valour contributed towards the eventual victory of her group and the peace and political stability which the Kolola enjoyed henceforth. More importantly, Mamochisane played a valuable role in the huge political stature or hegemony which the Kolola achieved over their neighbours. Indeed, men were there at the time, but Mamochisane was prepared to lay down her life in defence of her people and society.

In Ghana, Okyenhene Afia Dokuaa<sup>7</sup> of Akyem Abuakwa provides an important example of females who took up arms in defence of the independence and sovereignty of their kingdoms. According to the historical record, from 1700 to 1811, Akyem Abuakwa was constantly at war with Asante (Affrifah, 2000: 23–122). These wars eventually reduced Akyem Abuakwa to a tributary state of Asante. In the circumstance, Akyem Abuakwa struggled to recover her independence and sovereignty from Asante hegemony but never succeeded until after the 1826 Akantamasu War in which Akyem Abuakwa, under Okyenhene Afia Dokuaa, joined the British-led Southern Alliance against Asante and defeated that power. Earlier in the 1824 Nsamankow War between Asante and the British-led Southern Alliance, Dokuaa contributed a contingent under the command of the Kukurantumihene (the chief of Kukurantumi). Carl Christian Reindorf (1966: 190) and Kofi Affrifah (200: 118) maintain that although the Asante eventually defeated the British and their local allies, the Akyem Abuakwa contingent, with the allied support of Akuapem, defeated the Asante forces they encountered in a battle fought near Asene in the neighbourhood of the present-day Asante-Akyem town of Obogu.

In view of the Asante victory over the Southern Alliance, Okyenhene Dokuaa did not achieve the objective of regaining the independence and sovereignty of her kingdom. But fortunately for her, the appointed time came in 1826 when there was another armed encounter between Asante and the South led, as usual, by the British. In June 1826, news reached the South that an invading Asante army of some 40,000 men was advancing towards the coast. The news threw Akyem Abuakwa into a state of confusion as panic-stricken subjects of Okyenhene Dokuaa abandoned their villages and fled towards Akuapem, the Volta and the Accra plains (Reindorf, 1966: 196–199). In desperation, Dokuaa convened a meeting of the Abuakwa War Council to deliberate on this emergency crisis. The first decision the council took was to mobilise an army to meet the invading Asante forces. The available literature outlines the active role Okyenhene Dokuaa played in this armed encounter with Asante. Dokuaa showed that a woman could do what men were doing at that time. According to Reindorf (1966: 200–201), Dokuaa and Okuapemhene Ado Dankwa and their forces initially encamped at a place called Kponkpo but later moved to join one King Dowuona at Okamfra. Dokuaa and her men fought the Asante in several battles. In the end, the Asante forces were defeated.

Though all the Southern states, with the exception of Kwawu (Kwahu), allied with the British and Danes in fighting Asante, much of the credit has been given to Dokuaa. It is recorded that even after the major battles, the Akyem, led by Okyenhene Dokuaa, inflicted further defeats on the Asante forces in minor actions (Affrifah, 2000: 121–122). With Asante defeated and humbled, the Akyem states, like all others which had joined the Southern Alliance, were now

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<sup>7</sup> Afia Dokuaa was the Queen mother of Akyem Abuakwa, but in 1817, she was enstooled as the new Okyenhene because by then there was no male royal of age to accede to the Kyebi throne. See Affrifah (2000: 114). On the other hand, Kumi Attobra (1976: 23) asserts that Twum Ampofo, the eldest son of Dokuaa was elected king of Akyem Abuakwa, but Dokuaa decided to take over from him and rule like a king when she saw that the elders of Kyebi, the capital of Akyem Abuakwa, were trying to manipulate Ampofo.

poised to recover their independence from Asante. It is now clear that Dokuaa's role in liberating the Akyem states and the rest of Southern Ghana from Asante domination was enormous indeed. This is the reason why a horn music is played at the Kyebi palace in her honour. A line from this music reads: *Dokuaa obaa basia a oko oprem ano*, meaning "Dokuaa, the courageous woman who fights before canon." Thus, whenever this horn music is played, people are reminded of Dokuaa's historical role in the 1826 Akantamasu (or Dodowa) War between Asante and the British-led Southern Alliance which did so much to liberate Southern Ghana from Asante imperialism and hegemony.

Okyenhene Afia Dokuaa aside, there were other female traditional political leaders in pre-colonial Ghana who also joined the men in their societies to face the perils of the battlefield. Both Asante oral traditions and many written historical documents refer to four queens who accompanied their national army to war. These courageous women were Dwabenhema (Juabenhema) Ama Serwaa, Ataa Birago of Kokofu, Akyaa of Asansu and Edwesoheema (Ejisuheema) Yaa Asantewaa.<sup>8</sup> Yaa Asantewaa especially has gained a colossal popularity in the political history of Ghana because of her role in the 1900–1901 Asante armed resistance against British imperialism. In 1896, the British authorities arrested Asantehene Kwaku Dua III or Agyeman Prempe I, Asantehema Yaa Akyaa, and most of the divisional and wings chiefs of Asante and exiled them first to Sierra Leone and later to the Seychelles Islands. Again, the British imposed a tax of four shillings per head on the Asante. The British, in addition, decided to depose those Asante chiefs who were anti-British and replace them with people who would submit to their whims and caprices. Worse of all, the British governor, Arnold Hodgson, foolishly and arrogantly demanded that the Golden Stool, which the Asante considered to be the embodiment of their soul and the symbol of their survival as a nation, be given to him so that he could sit on it. As the Asante could not tolerate such a sacrilege, the demand immediately touched off a strong rebellion of virtually all the important Asante states under the leadership of Edwesoheema Yaa Asantewaa in 1900. The Asante forces, led in person by Yaa Asantewaa, attacked the fort in Kumasi in which Governor Hodgson and his forces had taken refuge. The Asante soldiers engaged the British-led forces in several battles, lasting from April to November of the same year. In the end, however, the British and their allies overcame the Asante forces and defeated them. Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante generals who had helped in prosecuting the war against the British were arrested and sent to the Seychelles Islands to join their kinsmen in exile.

The Asante rebellion was quashed anyway, but there is no doubt that Yaa Asantewaa was a woman of impressive courage, tenacity of purpose and determination which demonstrated to the British imperialists that they could not get off lightly as far as subduing Asante and subjecting it to British colonial rule was concerned. That a great amount of literature abounds on Yaa Asantewaa is a fact, and this is so because of how, as a woman, she mustered courage and inspired her people to go to war in defence of their territorial independence and sovereignty at a time when men were afraid to propose and spearhead such undertakings. Nevertheless, very little has been done on her administrative and intellectual capabilities, but this deficiency does not in any way detract from the huge stature she has carved for herself in the history of Asante and Ghana, and Africa as a whole, particularly when it comes to the history of women.

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<sup>8</sup> Yaa Asantewaa acceded to the Edweso stool towards the end of the nineteenth century because Edwesoheema Akwasi Afrane had been exiled to the Seychelles Island with Asantehene Prempe I and other important chiefs of the Asante Union. Yaa Asantewaa's occupation of the Edweso stool was for a short period because she was also arrested by the British after the 1900 anti-British uprising in Asante which she inspired and led.



Yaa Asantewaa's achievements for the Asante Union were really remarkable considering her background within the Asante polity. Interestingly, she was not a member of the mainstream Oyoko royal lineage which was obliged to present kings and queens to the Asanteman monarchy (Nketiah, 2005: 32). Accordingly, she was not and could never have become an Asantehemaa (Queenmother of Asante). Edweso, where she was queen, was not one of the principal states within the Asante Confederacy. Though Edweso was important to the Union, its chief and queen mother did not form part of the Asante Kotoko Council. And so if Yaa Asantewaa could mobilise an Asante army to attack the British with the sole aim of defending the whole Confederacy, then she was patriotic indeed. It is in recognition of her bravery and resilience, and especially her patriotic zeal that a girls' senior high school has been established in Kumasi in her memory. It is for the same commemoration of Yaa Asantewaa's deeds that a museum has been built at her hometown, Edweso (Ejisu), and named after her (Nketiah, 2005: 33). It is equally for the same reason that Professor Adu Boahen published in 2003 the *Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British of 1900-1*, edited by Emmanuel Akyeampong.

Queen Nzinga Mbande of Angola, born in 1582 to the king of the Ndongo kingdom, is another black warrior queen whose military exploits could not be brushed aside in this enterprise. Described as a great female soldier, diplomat and a "heroine of slave trade", Queen Nzinga played a major role in her kingdom's resistance against Portuguese advances in Southern Congo for many years (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994: 42). Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch maintains that it was largely due to her valour and resistance to Portuguese rule that the Portuguese recognised her and turned her father's title of Ndongo into the name of Angola (p. 42), and that after many years of war against the Portuguese, Nzinga Mbande was sent to Luanda in 1622 to discuss peace terms with the Portuguese (p. 41). Knowing what she wanted to gain, she tactically and diplomatically allowed herself to be baptised by the Portuguese, and in exchange for her goodwill towards them, the Portuguese, in turn, agreed to free the chiefs whom they had made vassal in her kingdom. They further recognised Nzinga's authority over Ndongo. She used her diplomatic skills to get new allies, both local and external.

Indeed, since she was aware that she had no kinship support and could not establish the legitimacy of her rule, Nzinga always used diplomacy and political twists to secure allies to challenge the Portuguese forces, and to establish her authority over external allies. First she allied herself with an indigenous warrior ethnic group, the Jaga, a marginal group of warriors who had arrived from the southern Kwanza river plateau, against the Portuguese. With the support of the Jaga, who provided her with mobile tactics, Nzinga waged a protracted guerrilla warfare against the Portuguese (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994: 41). She was able to persuade the African members in the Portuguese army to desert. The Portuguese attempts to capture her dead or alive failed. Later on, Queen Nzinga broke ranks with the Jaga, who had deserted to the camp of the Portuguese, and allied herself with the Dutch, who had by then occupied Luanda. And here, with the support of the Dutch, she was able to negotiate peace with the Portuguese, who had also established themselves at Matamba.

Ife traditions also recall an early warrior queen, Moremi (Ogbomo, 2005: 357). In the eighteenth century, the Isuama Ibo of Nigerian, whose villages were smaller than their neighbours, are reported to have made up for their deficient manpower by encouraging their womenfolk to fight alongside their husbands in defence of their farmlands (Jones, 1977: 66). Queen Amina of the Zaria state of Northern Nigeria was also a great conqueror. Her reign was characterised with thirty-four years of uninterrupted warfare. Her wars of expansion made Zaria

a great centre for the then east-west trans-Saharan trade. Further, Queen Mma Ntatisé, who ruled as regent of the Kwa Zulu/Natal throne in South Africa did not restrict her political activities solely to the management of the kingdom on behalf of her son, but also engaged in wars of conquest in the interest of her society. She boldly declared war on Moshweshwe, the Zulu chief and founder of Lesotho, and between 1822 and 1835, she fought several wars against neighbouring peoples and won many of them (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994: 40).

These black warrior queens were probably the counterparts of the female soldiers included in the army of Dahomey. It is important to note that black women under arms did not limit their activities to the army; women also formed part of the navy and commanded military action at sea. According to Rosalind Miles (1989: 50), the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra commanded a military action at the Battle of Actium, where she, together with her lover, the Roman general Mark Antony, were defeated. At any rate, it is obvious that pre-colonial African women fought as war-leaders and in the ranks; they fought in troops, as regular soldiers. Considering all this evidence, the historical reality of women fighting in defence of their societies and for purposes of territorial expansion in pre-colonial Africa can never be doubted. Now, if we consider the services of the armed forces of past civilisations and those of our contemporary nation-states as valuable and as enormous contribution to the existence of society, then we should acknowledge, and even eulogise, the political contributions of the pre-colonial African women who joined their male counterparts under arms and fought in defence of their respective societies.

## WOMEN AS POLITICAL ADVISORS AND LAW-MAKERS

In her 1980 study, *Women and Work*, Sheila Lewenhak (cited in Miles, 1989: 34) maintains that evidence from existing Stone Age cultures conclusively shows that in most past African societies, women could take on the role of government counsellors and law-givers. In this sense, one could argue that women of the past contributed towards the development of their societies by way of their good counsel and the laws they helped enact in regulating the lives of their polities in both internal and external relationships. An important personality in the administration of Kanem-Bornu, for example, was the Queen mother known by the title *Magira*.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes, she could prevent the Mai from taking certain decisions, apparently those which could lead to the ruin of the society, or those which were not in the interest of the polity. Also, the first wife of the King called *Gumsu* and his official elder sister, known as *Megara*, exercised great influence in the state in terms of decision-making. These women could over-power or even dethrone a weak Mai in the interest of the state.

The kingdom of Ganda, later to be known as Buganda, also had a political system which entrusted the queen mother with enormous power and authority to help in the effective and efficient management of the society. This polity emerged around the sixteenth century in what is now Uganda in East Africa. Right from its foundation, the structure of the Ganda government imposed limitations on the power of the king. The main element of this structure was ‘the balancing power of the queen mother’ (Hanson, 2002: 220). In Ganda, the queen mother was

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<sup>9</sup> This title and position bears resemblance with the Hebrew term *Gēbirā*, also meaning queen mother, which seems to refer to the mother of the acknowledged heir to the throne of Israel or to the mother of the reigning king, hence “queen mother”. She may also be the chief, or first wife of the king. See Ackerman (1993: 635).

very powerful and autonomous, very much respected and feared. The Ganda political system was carefully devised in order that the powers and position of the queen mother could 'check and balance' the authority of the king. In fact, without the queen mother, "there would be no one to check the king if he behaved too evilly" (Hanson, 2002: 224). Both the king and the queen mother had virtually the same powers in the sense that both could appoint ministers and allocate land to them, and collect taxes. The Ganda queen mother, like that of Asante, acted as king-maker, and she had the right to mobilise her lineage and its supporters and allies to support her son to become the next king. Lastly, she was very wealthy because she had large estates or lands allocated to her in every part of the kingdom. This large extensive land gave the queen mother the material base and a source of wealth which made her independent of the king. The people who lived on these lands or estates served the queen mother and not the king, a situation analogous to that of Asante where some queen mothers, like those of Kokofu and Dwaben, owned villages and towns which served them.<sup>10</sup>

Onaiwu W. Ogbomo (2005: 358), based on evidence provided by Hilda Kuper, reveals how the queen mother of Swaziland wielded great power and assisted the king in the administration of the Swazi kingdom. Ogbomo intimates that in this kingdom, the king and the queen mother occupied the highest political position. Among other functions, they presided over the highest courts, summoned national gatherings, controlled the age classes, allocated land, disbursed national wealth, and helped to organise important social activities. An important observation made in relation to the position of the queen mother in both the Ganda and Swazi kingdoms is that, the queen mothers were not merely assistants to the kings; nor were they only members of the kings' council or advisory body. Their position essentially 'rivalled' that of the king. Yet, they were to advise the kings on important issues and help in the formulation of laws and policies which would help the smooth administration of their societies. More significantly, the fact that the queen mother in the Ganda kingdom was the only one who could control the arbitrary powers of the king was an indication that to a large extent, the survival of the polity depended on the good counsel of the queen mother.

## WOMEN IN THRONES AS QUEENS, CHIEFS AND REGENTS

The cases of female involvement in indigenous politics were not restricted to military services or being part of advisory bodies to males. A curious survey of Africa's past provides sufficient evidence to show that many African women did make active contributions to the political development of their societies as rulers, whether as queen mothers, regents or 'crowned' chiefs. Most African societies, especially in matrilineal set-ups, created the office of the queen mother to assist the king or the chief, as the case may be, in administering the state. Indeed, the position of queen mother appears to be as old as the institution of chieftaincy itself.<sup>11</sup> If so, then Africa has benefitted from the knowledge and services of women for a very long time in politics.

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<sup>10</sup> In Asante, the Dwabenhema (Queen mother of Dwaben) and the Kokofuhema (Queen mother of Kokofu) had several villages and towns under their jurisdiction which served them directly. For example, Konongo, Bobiri and Nkwanta, all in present-day Asante Akyem, were under the Dwabenhema and served her accordingly. Papase, Mono, Kesewa, Adane Anweam and Aduam, all of which were directly under the Chief of Pinakwa, were indirectly under the Kokofuhema. See Rattray (1929: 179–205).

<sup>11</sup> Onaiwu W. Ogbomo asserts that in the kingdom of Benin, the title and position of the queen mother (Iyoba) was introduced in about 1505. See page 357.

The ancient civilisations of Africa provide abundant examples of queen mothers who helped in the effective and efficient administration of their societies and, thus, contributed to the political development of their respective societies in particular and Africa in general. In this direction, the Queen of Sheba is a typical example.<sup>12</sup> Though she was not an indigenous African, the Queen of Sheba used her position as the controller of the region to establish a political relationship with Israel under wise King Solomon which directly or indirectly affected the future political life of Ethiopia. The Queen's visit to Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E., with extravagant gifts and a lot of issues to discuss with Solomon,<sup>13</sup> has been described as reflecting several important and inter-connected elements, including internationalism, diplomacy, and sagacity, of Solomonic administration (Meyers, 1993: 692). It has also been maintained that by transporting some of the wealth of her country to the capital of Israel, the Queen of Sheba aggrandised Jerusalem and contributed to the assertion of its international pre-eminence in the Near East. The direct impact of the Sheba-Israel relationship on Ethiopia came in the form of sexual intercourse and migration or imperialism. It has been established that the relationship between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba grew intimate later, leading to the birth of a son called Menelik. This son is said to have been the first ruler of the new royal lineage, the Solomonic dynasty, which he established in Ethiopia (Fynn, Addo-Fenning and Anquandah, 1993: 46; Meyers, 1993: 692). If both the political and social dimensions of the relationship are synthesised, the obvious message the product would convey is the founding of Ethiopia as a new power in the East African coast. As a result, a political and social relationship also came to be established between Ethiopia and Israel. This socio-political alliance was to influence the attitude of the Ethiopians and the future course of the development of Ethiopia (Fynn, Addo-Fenning and Anquandah, 1993: 46). On the basis of this view, it could be argued that the contemporary political rapport between Ethiopia and Israel owes much of its success to the foundations laid through the political exploits of the Queen of Sheba.

Mention can also be made of Cleopatra who became Queen of Egypt in 51 B.C.E. at the age of seventeen years (Waterfield, 1967: 37). Cleopatra was a shrewd and capable woman who tried to get rid of her husband, Ptolemy XIV, who was only ten years old. Unfortunately for her, she was rather ousted from the palace by a group of men led by Theodotus, the eunuch Pothinus and a half-Greek general, Achillas. However, after Caesar had defeated Ptolemy XIV and the latter's disappearance, Cleopatra became queen again by marrying her younger brother who became Ptolemy XV. It has been argued that Cleopatra's attempts to regain the throne were motivated more by patriotic reasons than by selfish interests. She was desirous of maintaining some independence for Egypt against the powerful Romans, who developed interest in Egypt as a potentially useful and attractive colony, and she reasoned that it was only by winning over their

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<sup>12</sup> Recent studies maintain that the Queen of Sheba was a ruler of a people called the Sabeans, who occupied a territory in southwest Arabia, approximately where present-day Yemen is located. The Semitic peoples of Sheba built up a far-reaching trade, especially in spices and precious metals and stones. Some historical accounts show that the Sabeans colonised nearby parts of Africa, including Ethiopia (see Meyers, 1993: 692). Other records establish that the rise of the Axumite kingdom, which Ethiopia was to supplant in the future, was partly due to the influx of large groups of immigrants from Yemen, who called themselves the *Habashat*. It was the intermarriages between these immigrants and the local Kushite (Cushite) population that laid the foundations of the Ethiopian kingdom (Fynn, Addo-Fening and Anquandah, 1993: 42). Admittedly, the various sources agree on some relationship between Sheba and Ethiopia. At any rate, Sheba was a prosperous land and, thus, a symbol of wealth.

<sup>13</sup> For example, according to Werner Keller (1957: 213), the Queen of Sheba wanted her chief export trade to be with and through Israel alone.

leaders that she could achieve her ends. In this sense, Cleopatra's love affairs with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony had considerable political implications for Egyptian independence. The view that Cleopatra contributed to the development of Egypt and sought to maintain the independence and sovereignty of the country appears to contain some amount of truth considering that after her defeat at the Battle of Actium and her suicide, together with her lover Mark Antony, Alexandria, the Egyptian capital, ceased to be in touch with the vigorous life of Greece, while Rome extended her power over the whole of Egypt for the next two centuries (Waterfield, 1967: 38–39). In any case, as administrator of Egypt, Cleopatra showed ability, energy and wisdom, and she certainly had great dreams of building Egypt into a world empire in which she would be queen (Caldwell, 1965: 423).

While the above examples examine situations where queen mothers exercised or shared power with kings, there were other instances where women assumed direct political control and, probably, had the opportunity to exhibit their political skills in far better ways. It is believed that women were among the thirty-one Ogo (paramount chiefs) who ruled and shaped the political life of predynastic Benin (Ogbomo, 2005: 357). The political history of modern Ghana also provides numerous instances where females assumed total political control in many societies due either to such provisions being made by the political systems of the societies concerned or to the dearth of male heirs to assume power. In the coastal areas of Ghana, Agua Brafo, who ruled Efutu briefly in the early 1700's, and Tuteba, who ruled Agona from the early 1680's to the early 1700's, were examples of the outstanding women who exercised political power over their subjects in several marvellous ways. Tuteba, for instance, is said to have been an astute and courageous politician. Her reign marked a period of economic prosperity in Agona. In fact, Tuteba was also a trader. During her reign, she controlled trade in her state and dealt with the European merchants as she thought fit (Nketiah, 2005: 36). She decided which European nations and merchants should operate in her territory, which, at that time, included Winneba. In the interior parts of Ghana, women were even more active in politics. Ama Serwaa, Afrokoma I and Akua Sapomaa, all of Dwaben in Asante, were some of such women.<sup>14</sup>

Queen Amina of the state of Zaria in Northern Nigeria was another African woman whose contributions to the political development of Africa cannot be underestimated. Amina became the queen of Zaria by right of succession. The rise and growth of Zaria during the sixteenth century was, in fact, the work of Amina. Some scholars have doubted the historical reality of Amina's existence and regarded her as a mythical figure. This reason is partly because Muslim ideology and practice did not accord women importance in society, particularly in public affairs. Women were not allowed to participate in political and judicial activities in Muslim states. Traditional accounts, however, make frequent references to Queen Amina and her effective administration of Zaria, highlighting the great prosperity her reign brought to the state. It was in recognition of her outstanding achievements that the modern state of Nigeria has erected a statue in her honour at the centre of Lagos.

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<sup>14</sup> These women ruled Dwaben in succession from about 1840 to 1875. They qualified to occupy the Dwaben stool because Asante political tradition made provision for women to occupy the Dwaben paramount stool. Moreover, during the 1840–1875 period, there was no male royal to occupy the stool after the death of Ama Serwaa's two sons, Kwasi Boaten and Kofi Boaten, in close succession. As a result, Queen mother Ama Serwaa assumed the position of the king. She was succeeded by her daughter Afrokoma I, who was, in turn, succeeded by Akua Sapomaa, daughter of Afrokoma.

The exploits of Queen Yoko of Sierra Leone also deserve mention and appraisal here. Yoko was born around 1849 in the Gbo province of Sierra Leone. Yoko came to power through her second husband Gbenje, a great warrior whose fame spread in Sierra Leone (Hoffer, 1974: 177). Carol P. Hoffer (1974: 180) emphasises that due to Gbenje's fighting spirit, the British sought his assistance during the 1873/74 Anglo-Asante conflict popularly known in Ghanaian history as the Sagrenti War. Later, however, relations between Gbenje and the British became strained, culminating in the British arresting Gbenje and some of his sub-chiefs. It was Yoko, Gbenje's last wife, who managed to get Gbenje released (Hoffer, 1974: 179). King Gbenje was so much overwhelmed by Yoko's remarkable achievement that he developed greater confidence in Yoko and elevated her to the status of head wife though, in terms of seniority, Yoko, as has been pointed out, was the most junior of Gbenje's wives. Gbenje went further to encourage her in developing her own reputation as a political figure by sending her on many diplomatic missions to various parts of the interior of his territory and also to the capital of the colony, Freetown. Before Gbenje's death in 1878, he informed his kinsmen and the British colonial officials of his wish to be succeeded by Yoko, and truly, when Gbenje died, his Kinsmen carried out his wishes (Hoffer, 1974: 179).

Looking at the way by which Yoko rose to power, one would be tempted to attribute her elevation solely to her marital relationship. Nevertheless, Yoko's rise to power could be attributed partly to her own personality and diplomatic skills. At any rate, Yoko showed signs of possessing enormous diplomatic skills and displayed a good sense of political maturity during her reign. Knowing how powerful the British were, Queen Yoko, right from the beginning of her administration, devised ways and means of winning their favour. Again, desirous of ensuring the growth and survival of her kingdom, Queen Yoko almost all the time resorted to peace negotiations whenever her kingdom was involved in conflicts with any neighbouring state in order to avert war (Hoffer, 1974: 179). While the peace negotiations were still on course, she would inform the British authorities in Freetown of the state of affairs and request their assistance when it became necessary. Genuinely, one observes a mark of political shrewdness and meticulous calculations in Yoko's ruling style in the sense that while her late husband had adopted the policy of expansionism and, for that matter, had engaged in wars of conquest, she wisely assessed the possible dangers in such undertakings in view of the British attitude towards such ventures and refrained from them. Further, probably having examined the economic, social and political dangers of emigration, particularly of the active labour force, Queen Yoko avoided any policies and programmes which might have encouraged the emigration of her subjects. Rather, she devoted her time to consolidating her Kpa Mende Kingdom under her authority. She did this by using judicious force, and sometimes using troops under British orders (Hoffer, 1974: 181). Without doubt, Queen Yoko was not only an outstanding ruler of the Mende people; she was also an intelligent and great diplomat. She successfully exploited her good relations with the British to achieve her own ends.

Even among the Tonga of Central and Southern Africa, where women's submission to men was great, there were opportunities for women to occupy higher political offices and, therefore, contribute to the development of the society. There were female chiefs who had power over relatively limited units of production. In this area, there were many women who established their own settlements and ruled over them. To gain their autonomy, some of these women left their husbands and established their villages in which they settled with their relatives. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (1994: 34) recounts that in 1900, one female chief, called Namulizili,

divorced her husband and established her own village with five of her unmarried children; a married daughter and her husband; a sister and her son; another sister and her husband; and six other groups. Another woman called Civi, according to Coquery-Vidrovitch's account, also left her husband and founded a new settlement with her sons, brothers and other male relatives (p. 35). Yet another woman called Matimba established a village with fifteen adults and six children who worked on her 15-acre farm (p. 35).

Pre-colonial African women's contributions to political development of the continent during periods of regency were equally outstanding but have, as in many other areas of human activity, remained little known to many people, both local and foreign. Thus, apart from those women who established their own villages through their own efforts and became independent rulers over these settlements, other women exhibited their political acumen through regency. In fact, before the colonial period, regency was a source of real female power in many African societies, both matrilineal and patrilineal. In fourth-century C.E. Ethiopia, for instance, a queen mother, whose name is not provided in the available records, administered the kingdom on the death of King Ezana, with the help of Frumentius and Aedusius, the two Syrian Christians who introduced Christianity into Ethiopia (Fynn, Addo-Fenning and Anquandah, 1993: 42–50). Another Ethiopian woman called Menetewab (1720–1770) is also reported to have become caretaker empress on two successive occasions: the first was on behalf of her son when her husband, the king, died in 1730, and the second was on behalf of her grandson when her son, the new king, also died (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994: 37).

Mamochisane<sup>15</sup> of the Kolola kingdom of Zambia provides another impressive example of a female regent. She gained power as a queen through her own personality and bravery. After the Kolola defeat of the Lozi tribe, her father, King Sebitwane, recognised her valour and gave her the central province of his kingdom to administer (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994: 37). Before his death, Sebitwane named Mamochisane as his successor, although in the Kolola patrilineal system, it was only sons who could succeed their fathers. Aware of the traditional dictates of her state and desirous of maintaining the peace and political stability of her kingdom, Mamochisane reigned only as a surrogate for some time and abdicated in favour of her brother (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994: 39).

During the first half of the nineteenth century, a very powerful woman, Queen Mma Ntatisé, the first wife of Chief Mokotjo, also became regent of the Kwa Zulu/Natal throne in South Africa. When Mokotjo died, Mma Ntatisé boldly assumed power as regent and managed the kingdom on behalf of her son, who was then only thirteen years (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994: 39). Mma Ntatisé did this at the expense of her brother-in-law, who, by custom, should have inherited the throne. Ntatisé proved so effective a ruler that during the period of her regency, she asserted the independence of her people, the Tlokwa, from other Sotho peoples in South Africa, and boldly declared war on Moshweshwe, the Zulu chief and founder of Lesotho (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1995: 39). Between 1822 and 1835, Ntatisé fought several wars against neighbouring people and won many of them. Here, one is not so much interested in Mma Ntatisé's ability to wage wars against her neighbours and defeat them as in the contributions such ventures made to the development and political independence of the Tlokwa people and their society.

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<sup>15</sup> Mamochisane has already been mentioned in the first paragraph of the discussion on 'Women under Arms for Territorial Defence and Expansion. See above.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this survey has brought to the fore some important issues which need to be considered in post-colonial Africa. The study set out to examine the contributions pre-colonial African women made to the political development of the continent, and, as the study has revealed, contemporary Africa owes much of its political successes to the exploits, not only of men of the past, but also to the activities of women. Women participated in virtually all political activities. Women achieved visible and powerful positions in society and, through this, made their impact felt in the political life of their societies. Some pre-colonial African women took up arms and joined their male counterparts in defending the independence and sovereignty of their kingdoms or for purposes of territorial expansion. Others gave counsel to rulers in order to ensure the growth and survival of their polities. Yet others gained power as queens who assisted their kings in administering their societies. Even in some cases, women gained political control as chiefs or even kings, without sharing power with anyone, and successfully managed their states. There were also women who acted as rulers on the death of the substantive kings and when the prospective kings were too young to be able to control society on their own. From all this, one becomes convinced that women did not only play what some scholars have described as complementary roles in the political administration of the indigenous states, kingdoms and empires of pre-colonial Africa; some women assumed positions of pre-eminence and effectively and efficiently directed state policies and conducted diplomacy skilfully which combined with those of men to help in the development of the continent. Indeed, the contributions of African women to the development of the continent permeated all aspects of the life of society.

At this point, it should be stressed that the role women played in society in pre-colonial Africa was made possible both by the provisions their societies made for their progress and the advantages women took of them. Of course, several African societies recognised the role of women within the lines of kinship, and several visitors to these societies were shocked by the easy familiarity between men and women and the freedom enjoyed by women. It should be emphasised, however, that women themselves were the most critical and important factor in their rise to political power because if they had not taken advantage of the opportunities that their societies offered them, those opportunities could not themselves have achieved much for women, as the evidence provided here clearly shows.

Whether women's progress was achieved on their own or by the assistance society provided them is not as important here as finding an answer to the pertinent question of the 'seeming' subjugation of women in many African societies today. If women enjoyed more freedom, which allowed them to make meaningful contribution to the development of Africa in the past, why do they seem to have lost much of that liberty? What circumstances occurred to change that positive course Africa was charting? The answer to this question could be located in European imperialism in Africa. For one thing, European interference in the policy of land acquisition decreased women's access to land, particularly in the patrilineal societies. For another, the Western educational system introduced with the advance of colonialism overwhelmingly benefited males to the disadvantage of women. Only a few females gained access to Western education. Even so, women were made to understand that they had naturally been designed to act only as wives and home managers. In view of this, men gained tremendous advantage over women in terms of taking up job opportunities which enabled men to become dominant in the colonial system. This practice was to be carried over to the post-independence



period. This phenomenon influenced the indigenous systems so much so that women became marginalised in the indigenous political institutions. In most parts of colonial Africa, the nature of administration and jurisdiction ordinances enhanced the political authority of men and subjected women to the control of men. As a result, the councils of chiefs instituted during the colonial period in most parts of Africa hardly included queen mothers or any women. This became a major feature of chieftaincy which post-colonial African governments maintained.

The good news, however, is that current research into the political activities of women in post-colonial Africa has brought to our attention the fact that many African women, in spite of numerous challenges, including opposition from their men, have inherited the spirit of their pre-colonial ancestors and have already made magnificent contributions to their societies. Studies have shown now that women can do what men can do, and even do it better. In the context of this *fact*, it is the hope of the researcher that in the near future, more and more African women would be seen on our political platforms, competing with men with the view to rebuilding the shattered political life of Africa. This hope, it is believed, could be better realised if the various African societies would take the initiative by creating more chances for women to occupy some of the important positions on our political hierarchy.

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